

BRIEF

What we learned about child marriage and case management in refugee settings

UNHCR and Plan International

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UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency



Introduction

Plan International and UNHCR have been collaborating since 2021 to improve the support we provide to girls who are at risk of child marriage, as well as ever-married girls.¹ The collaboration focuses on the prevention and response to child marriage across both child protection (CP) and gender-based violence (GBV) sectors in three different refugee and mixed displacement contexts.

This brief summarises the main lessons learned from the project. **It is based on a technical paper and a frontline worker checklist** that seek to improve the handling of child marriage cases in CP and GBV case management. While piloting took place in refugee and mixed displacement settings, the findings are also relevant to case management practices in all types of humanitarian settings.

Since girls are disproportionately and most adversely affected by the practice of child marriage, improving services for girls was the priority of the collaboration.

Overview

Globally around 103 million people are forcibly displaced, including 32.5 million refugees and 58.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Among these are an estimated 18 million girls under the age of 18 who are forcibly displaced. Moreover, an estimated 400,000 children on average are born as refugees every year, many of whom to displaced adolescent mothers. They are born into a situation with layers of disadvantage, with potentially life-long impacts. The number of forcibly displaced persons has worsened rapidly in the last few years. UNHCR notes that the numbers of people under their mandate rose by 25 per cent from 2021 to 2022 [1].

Rates of child marriage have been found to rise rapidly in areas affected by forced displacement, despite global progress to reverse trends over the past 20 years [1]. Girls who experience displacement are at an elevated risk of entering into marriage early. Research shows how forced displacement can drive rates of child marriage higher than before a crisis – as these snapshots illustrate:

In Yemen, more than 65% of girls are married before the age of 18, compared to 50% before the conflict there [2]. A 2021 study found that girls who are forcibly displaced experience child marriage more than boys or girls in the host community [3].

In Nyal – a village in South Sudan severely affected by conflict – 71% of girls were married before the age of 18, compared to the national rate of 45% before the conflict [4]

In Lebanon, 23% of Syrian refugee girls under the age of 18 were married – a figure nearly three times higher than in pre-conflict Syria (8.5%) [5]



¹ Ever-married girls are girls who have ever experienced child marriage, and includes girls who are currently married, or are divorced, separated, widowed, or are otherwise no longer living in a union.

Why is this happening?

At the heart of the problem is a loss of rights. Forced displacement can reduce a person's access to their rights, whether they are displaced within their own country or have become a refugee in another country. While the loss of rights is a complex problem, it is worsened by the pressures of an environment of increased hardship and worsening gender inequality which disproportionately impact on girls' safety and wellbeing. Displacement settings can exacerbate factors at different levels that influence rates of child marriage.

Families and parents

Family incomes may be reduced and resources hard to reach. Social protection networks and systems – such as being in school – may be eroded. Or they may no longer exist or not be accessible as a result of people being on the move. People in some forcibly displaced communities may not have the right to access essential and protective services in the place where they are seeking safety. With less protection, children – particularly girls – are at increased risk of being exposed to violence, including gender-based violence in the home and in the community. These factors may prompt parents to marry their daughters early. They may view marriage as a form of protection from sexual abuse and exploitation, as a means to secure a better future for their daughter, or as a way to gain economically and ease some pressure on the family[6].

Adolescents, including girls

Girls themselves may view marriage as a way to meet their basic needs, particularly when they are forcibly displaced. In many contexts, marriage is a pathway to economic security for girls and women. They are often conditioned to aspire to this, with few other female role models to demonstrate viable alternatives. As such, forcibly displaced girls may seek out marriage as a way to meet basic needs such as food, shelter and protection. Once married, girls often face a cycle of violence perpetrated by their husband, in-laws or other family members that manifest into many scenarios attributed to marrying early.

Another common situation is that in crowded camps and transit centres, girls may have more opportunities to interact, socialise and begin relationships with other adolescents and young people. Yet, social and cultural norms and taboos around such interactions tend to remain the same despite the fast-changing environment. Girls may find themselves being pushed into marriage as a result of gossip and rumours, or young couples may choose to elope[6]. For some, peer pressure may induce girls to marry.

Wider society

Forcibly displaced persons, especially refugees, may not be granted full access to their rights by the host government [7]. As a consequence, in some places national laws that prohibit or limit the practice of child marriage may not be fully enforced or applied to refugee or displaced communities by the national authorities. Failure to consistently enforce such laws means that there is no accountability and the practice occurs with impunity. Other forms of gender-based violence against girls also may go unchecked and often become widespread. Gender inequality and discrimination worsen as a result of having limited access to rights – for example, the right to work. Girls end up becoming commodified.

Common challenges in handling child marriage cases

Plan International and UNHCR identified the following gaps in case management after undertaking in-depth context analyses into practices and programming on child marriage in three refugee and mixed responses in 2021.

- **Technical challenges:**

Case management service providers are overwhelmed and lack technical and foundational knowledge, such as on safe ethical case disclosure or identification, or UNHCR processes. Married girls are rarely seen as priority cases in case management unless there is a severe health-related concern. Standard operating procedures and referral mechanisms do not specifically consider the needs of ever-married girls or young mothers. Weaknesses exist in referral systems and services, especially the police and judicial services.

- **Coordination challenges:**

Child marriage is not seen as a priority for CP and GBV actors in humanitarian settings. Cross-sector responses to child marriage are disjointed, compartmentalised and often localised. Humanitarian responses do not systematically address child marriage or see it as being within their mandate to tackle.

- **Structural challenges:**

Some national or customary laws recognise or legalise child marriage. The practice is often supported locally as an acceptable religious, social and cultural norm. Communities can negatively perceive case workers who are trying to respond to child marriage as seeking to block local customs. Short-term, underfunded projects mean that competent staff, especially female, are lacking, which compromises quality case management for at-risk and married girls.

Learning from the project

Our role as case workers in supporting girls and their families

- The project found that when it came to child marriage, the role of case worker was often problematic and sometimes harmful, for both girls and case workers. A typical example was of case workers discovering a child marriage was about to happen and urgently engaging with a girl's parents, without following a proper case management process. The consent and agency of the girl were disregarded. Little consideration was given to the possibility of further harm to the girl that could arise from directly engaging with the parents and not first engaging her as the potential client. A more survivor-centred and adolescent girl-responsive approach is needed to explore if it is possible and safe to prevent the marriage.
- In several locations, communities had negative perceptions of case workers, where efforts to prevent child marriages had clashed with local customs. An approach of doing everything possible to stop a marriage can rupture relationships between the case worker, the family and the girl, and the community. In forcibly displaced communities, some child marriages will occur. Case workers must feel supported to understand that they are not the only actor responsible for stopping child marriages.
- Case workers appear to de-prioritise girls once they are married. Where child marriages do occur despite best efforts, case workers should continue to stay in contact with the girl and support her to maintain access to case management services. Retaining contact with the girl, even once married, is of the utmost importance.
- Constrained resources may force case workers to prioritise child marriage cases among refugee children. Recommended priorities are: (i) children and adolescents who are with their spouse; (ii) child marriage of children aged under 16; (iii) any cases requiring urgent medical attention or raising concerns of a threat to life. All cases of child marriage should be considered high-risk, but those involving younger children must be prioritised and must maintain a strong "best interests of the child" approach.

KEY ACTIONS:

- **Case management is as important for ever-married girls as it is for (imminent) risk cases. Case management should not stop because a girl has entered a marriage, or equally if her marriage ends.**
- **It is important to secure access to girls who are at risk of child marriage. This means that case workers should be careful not to overly pressure families to stop the marriage as the family may push the case worker away and disallow further contact.**

Best interests of the child

This is a key principle of all case management that involves children. It is enshrined in Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "In all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration". While there is no standard definition, it covers all elements that contribute to a child's wellbeing. When applying this principle to our case work, this is determined by four main factors, namely:

- Views of the child: taking into consideration age, maturity, individual circumstances and past experiences
- Needs of the child: social circumstances, protection, health, development
- Family: the presence or absence of the child's family or supportive caregivers
- Security and the environment of the child

To learn more, see [UNHCR's Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child](#).

Our case management capacity

- Contextual analyses or needs assessments should underpin all case management responses and protection decision-making. These analyses should recognise how child marriage intersects with gender inequitable social norms and attitudes that typically discriminate against girls, women and minority groups. Analyses should also consider challenges related to rights, legal considerations, refugee determination and durable solutions. They should be regularly updated to ensure that interventions do not reinforce harmful norms or practices, especially relating to child marriage. If staff lack knowledge and information about the realities that girls and their families are facing, this can create poorly planned case management and cause confusion about the roles and responsibilities of different agencies. Case management services are likely to be ineffective and potentially harmful as a result.
- The project identified a tendency among case workers to overlook the needs of girls who are married or have experienced marriage. Much of child marriage work focuses on girls at (imminent) risk of being married. Yet, married girls have an equal – and arguably greater – need for support as they are vulnerable to early pregnancy, intimate partner violence or child sexual abuse, deprivation of resources and other forms of GBV. A critical part of case management is ensuring that married girls can access the information and services they need.

- CP and GBV actors need to work together to identify, engage with and support married girls. They need to strike a balance between on the one hand, being pro-active about reaching younger married girls and identifying protection risks, and on the other, creating an environment where older married girls can seek help in line with a survivor-centred approach.
- Child marriage case transfer between CP and GBV actors can become complicated if standard operating procedures are not clear about who handles these cases. An adolescent girl who is married and about to turn 18 may still have outstanding protection concerns. Her case should be transferred smoothly from CP to GBV actors, which requires joint standard operating procedures to be in place.

KEY ACTIONS:

- ***Include child marriage as a priority issue in needs assessments and context analyses to guide decision-making and approaches on handling child marriage in case management and other key services.***
- ***Ensure that case workers have access to training to improve their competencies and skills including on applying an adolescent girl-responsive approach. This means that services are empowering and free of discrimination, judgement or reinforcement of harmful attitudes that might limit some adolescent girls' participation and access.***
- ***Ensure that supervisors provide sufficient, adequate and appropriate support to case workers who handle cases of child marriage to address any challenges they face including threats and risks towards the case worker.***
- ***Advocate for integrating lessons learned on handling cases of child marriage into CP and GBV case management guidelines, training and resources to prevent inconsistent responses and chances of learning being missed.***
- ***Ensure that UNHCR policies and processes regarding registration, refugee status determination and durable solutions clearly outline best practice when handling cases of child marriage, and that the use of Best Interest Procedures is well understood by both UNHCR staff and partners.***

Our coordination across CP and GBV

- The project created a unique environment for discussing a common approach for CP and GBV practitioners, to ensure that adolescent girls receive a coordinated, quality response to meet their needs. A common approach includes agreeing and applying several joint core standards and principles that underpin CP and GBV case management. Three cross-cutting principles must be incorporated into every aspect of the process for handling cases of child marriage: 1) do no harm; 2) best interests of the child; and 3) survivor-centredness.
- Working together, practitioners can reduce gaps in service delivery and develop stronger case management mechanisms. These include: creating joint working groups on child marriage; inviting each other to joint technical case conferences; developing joint strategies, training and messages; feeding back learning from cases and challenges into broader CP and GBV working groups and other sectors; ensuring service mapping and referral pathways capture services for all adolescent girls; developing or strengthening joint standard operating procedures on child marriage cases.
- Case management forums can be part of a common approach. The forums in the project brought together representatives from different referral services, UN agencies and local actors to improve ways of working through dialogue and sharing of experiences. Forum participants suggested also including representatives from the community-based child protection committees or other community representatives to ensure better participation and linkages with the community.
- How to handle reports and disclosures from children and adolescents emerged as an issue for staff across sectors and settings. Case workers – who in frontline responses are often adult men – need to know how to communicate and react to adolescent girls about their situations and experiences. Sensitive topics may arise such as physical violence, intimate partner violence, marital rape and sexually transmitted infections. Limited availability of services and referral pathways that are adolescent girl-responsive was also a constraint to quality services.

KEY ACTIONS:

- *Update case management standard operating procedures to reflect clearly the case management assessment process, risk ratings, criteria settings and nuances associated with UNHCR refugee case processing (as relevant). This is so that case workers understand how to apply these when handling cases of child marriage in either CP or GBV. In high-prevalence areas with a low capacity to respond, there may be a need to prioritise cases. Priorities for support are: married children who are with their spouse (in the camp/location); children under the age of 16 who are married or at risk of child marriage; and cases where there are immediate risks and further harm is likely.*
- *Encourage frontline staff to hold joint CP and GBV case conferences when there are complex cases of child marriage. This will also help to ensure an individualised response that meets the girl's needs and that is led by the most appropriate care provider, based on the details of each case and the capacity of actors.*
- *Improve the capacity of other sectors such as education, livelihoods, sexual and reproductive health, to better identify and handle disclosures of child marriage and GBV (as non-GBV practitioners), and safely refer to case management services.*

For more information about child marriage in forced displacement settings, contact Plan International and UNHCR at: Helpdesk.ChildMarriage@plan-international.org and hqchipro@unhcr.org



To learn more about our recommended actions for case management staff, from frontline case workers to global coordinators, please see the checklist here.

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About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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About UNHCR

What we want to achieve

A world where every stateless person and every person forced to flee can build a better future.

Who we are

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is a global organisation dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people.

What we do

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, leads international action to protect people forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. We deliver life-saving assistance like shelter, food and water, help safeguard fundamental human rights, and develop solutions that ensure people have a safe place to call home where they can build a better future. We also work to ensure that stateless people are granted a nationality.

Why we matter

Every year, millions of men, women and children are forced to flee their homes to escape conflict and persecution. We are the world's leading organisation dedicated to supporting people forced to flee and those deprived of a nationality. We are in the field in over 130 countries, using our expertise to protect and care for forcibly displaced and stateless people, who number 114 million as of September 2023.

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